

Witches, Ghosts and Goblins, Oh My!

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Anticipation and excitement of fun times abound once again as another Halloween approaches. Children and adults alike generally rate Halloween second only behind Christmas on the exciting holiday meter! And with good reason, although never adopted as a national holiday, Halloween nonetheless has a rich traditional lineage that historians link to the Celtic festival of Samhain and the Christian holiday All Saints’ Day. In other words, tradition that dates back hundreds of years.

With most anything we consider to be fun and exciting there is a certain element of risk to our well being associated with it. And when we think about the hazards associated with “fright night” it’s easy to understand the need to revisit them prior to the holiday each year. Why? Well, because Halloween involves our children. It involves town and rural streets that are sometimes busy and not so well lit. It also involves motor vehicles that travel the streets just mentioned and the drivers are not always of the mature, skilled, and responsible type. In many situations, alcohol will be involved.

Trick or Treat

The modern Halloween holiday is probably best known for the trick-or-treat tradition. Trick-or-treat is certainly what most kids think about when the thought of Halloween pops into their minds. It is, however, trick-or-treat and particularly the street walking part of trick-or-treat that presents the most serious risks. There are usually alternatives to trick-or-treat available for parents who wish to reduce or eliminate these risks for their children. Many civic organizations and most schools host Halloween parties for children as an alternative to trick-or-treat. Children usually come away from these parties having had just as much fun and with just as many treats as if they had gone trick-or-treating.

There are those who believe the tradition of trick-or-treat is an experience worthy of passing on to their own children. Most folks would not disagree. After all, our parents told exciting stories of their Halloween experiences. We have memories of our own exciting times trick-or-treating. And we shouldn’t deprive our children of the experience. Trick-or-treat just requires a bit of parental thought in preparation, planning and execution. Population growth continues to change the equation of trick-or-treating today versus when we were trick-or-treating versus when our parents were trick-or-treating. There are more people, more cars, larger neighborhoods, and more crime (including crime against children); these are some of the things we need to think about before we allow our children to hit the streets on Halloween night.

Before taking the witches, ghosts, and goblins out, or before turning them loose on their own, remember to review the following tips to keep them safe.

- Choose flame retardant costumes of bright colors or reflective properties. Consider face paint instead of a mask. Masks are notorious for obstructing the child's vision.
- Evaluate the age and maturity level of your children along with the area they'll be visiting before deciding to let them go on their own. Talk with neighbors and see if several families can go together as a group. There truly is safety in numbers. Parents should accompany smaller children instead of leaving them in the care of older children.
- If your neighborhood doesn't have street lights, sidewalks and relatively low density vehicle traffic, consider taking the kids to a neighborhood that offers these. Tell the children that "trick" in "trick-or-treat" does not mean pranks that are hurtful or harmful to others and property.
- Give the children a safety briefing on pedestrian versus vehicle traffic and proper interaction of both on streets and at intersections. Make sure they have a charged cell phone. Ensure they stay in well lighted areas and do not take shortcuts across rural and dimly lit areas. Tell them to be alert to any activity that would indicate they are being stalked or followed by anyone. They should only visit homes that have the outdoor light on. The outdoor light is an invitation, if it's on. If it's off, the occupants have either ran out of treats or do not participate in trick-or-treat.
- Make sure the children are told to bring their loot home to be inspected by an adult before sampling their treats. It's always a good idea to have the kids eat dinner before they go out to help curb their appetite and reduce the temptation to sample their goodies.

Adult Parties

Many adults love parties. And some of the best adult parties no doubt occur on Halloween. It's exciting to host, attend and participate in a party based on a theme of Halloween. There are just some things we never outgrow and Halloween still seems to bring out the kid in most of us. Making the Halloween party safe is one of the most serious and important things you can do.

- Make plans to host or attend the party with responsible use of alcohol. If you're hosting, ensure everyone attending has a plan for departing with someone alcohol-free at the wheel of the car. If this is not possible make sure an alternative plan is ready to activate to get guests home safely such as calling a cab. Or plan on those inebriated guests spending the night. Good hosts may even have all guests deposit their car keys in a shoe box or other container and control the box so that departing guests can be evaluated before getting their keys back. Attending guests should have a plan before arriving. Guests shouldn't depend completely on the host to take care of them if they decide to drink.
- Be cautious of open flames. Candles and oil burners/lamps look nice and smell great but make sure they are in an area that cannot catch anything on fire. Halloween decorations, curtains/drapes, and towels can be highly flammable and do not mix at all with open flames. In evaluating the risks associated with open flames, consider the potential that a candle, food warmer, oil lamp or oil burner could get knocked over during the party and understand what the consequences might be if this happens. Is there a fire extinguisher nearby?

- Guests that leave the party early or those who may be dispatched to the store to pick more beer should be reminded that the children will be trick-or-treating as late as 9:00 p.m. or even later. Be cautious of the children while driving and be ready to react if a child does something unsafe, unexpectedly.

All age groups are sure to enjoy fun and exciting times with the coming of Halloween on October 31st. It really is important to remember those things that keep the events fun and exciting and prevent the good times from turning tragic. We are all responsible for doing our part to keep this and every Halloween as safe as possible.